

## Reconciliation in the Middle East

### *A Biblical Perspective*

**Abstract:** This essay aims to make a preliminary exploration of what is involved in identifying resources in the canonical texts shared by Jews and Christians for healing and reconciliation in the apparently interminable conflict in Palestine/Israel. Consideration of forgiveness and reconciliation between individuals provides some insight into the implications of reconciliation at the social level. In classical and biblical antiquity, categories of honor and shame tend to exclude considerations of forgiveness as a virtuous act, and the biblical record is replete with holy wars, territorial struggles, and violence visited by the strong on the weak. The book of Isaiah both documents this situation and provides visions of its future reversal in the messianic poems (chaps. 9 and 11), the abolition of war (2:1–4), and an astonishing reinterpretation of the Abrahamic promise (19:24–25).

Recommendations for the resolution of conflict and for reconciliation between hostile parties, such as those proposed some years ago by the Geneva Document for Middle East Peace and Co-operation, do not appeal to religious texts or traditions, and it is well that they do not. We are only too familiar with the destructive effects of invoking the canonical texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in support of entrenched ideological positions. It is nevertheless the case, though less obviously so, that these texts contain resources for healing and reconciliation if we care enough to seek them out and if there were some way to bring them to bear on the resolution of conflicts by promoting mutual understanding or at least dissolving harmful misconceptions. The task is formidable and the risk of failure is high, but those of us who are professionally

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Joseph Blenkinsopp is John A. O'Brien Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at the University of Notre Dame. Among his recent publications are the three-volume Anchor Bible commentary on Isaiah (Doubleday) and *Opening the Sealed Book: The Interpretation of Isaiah in Late Antiquity* (Eerdmans).

engaged in theological and biblical study and teaching have an obligation to take up the challenge, accepting the risk of failure. In this essay, therefore, I propose to make a start on the road toward that distant horizon by reflecting on the theme of reconciliation in dialogue with those biblical texts Jews and Christians accept in one way or another, and to a greater or lesser degree, and often selectively, as authoritative.

## Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Because it is closer to our experience, it is easier to speak of reconciliation between individuals than between religions, ethnic groups, or nations. Reconciliation is generally understood to be the restoration of a broken relationship in which forgiveness is offered and accepted. But reading the recent literature on the subject,<sup>1</sup> one sees that forgiveness is a concept that raises a host of questions for philosophers and theologians, not to mention ordinary people who stop to think about it. Is there an obligation to forgive under any and all circumstances, or is it discretionary, a work of supererogation? Is there ever an obligation not to forgive, or to state it differently, would it ever be morally wrong to forgive? Is it always possible to forgive? What if the offer of forgiveness is rejected or the person to whom the offer is addressed does not acknowledge the need for forgiveness? If forgiveness implies the restoration of a broken relationship, does this, for example, mean that I cannot forgive a dead parent who abused me as a child?

A question the Holocaust endows with a special urgency and poignancy is whether the relatives, friends, or associates of a murder victim can forgive on behalf of the victim. To cite a well-known instance: this question of vicarious forgiveness confronted Simon Wiesenthal in the concentration camp, as he recorded in *Die Sonnenblume (The Sunflower)*, published in 1972. He found it impossible to respond or indeed say anything at all to a dying German soldier who begged for forgiveness for the murder of other Jews in which he had been involved, a decision with which some of his interlocutors agreed and others did not. We might also recall, perhaps with dismay, Elie Wiesel's prayer at ceremonies marking the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in 1995: "God of forgiveness, do not forgive those who

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1. Recent writing on the subject is conveniently summarized in Nigel Biggar, "Forgiveness in the Twentieth Century: A Review of the Literature, 1901–2001," in *Forgiveness and Truth: Explorations in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Alistair McFadyen and Marcel Sarot (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 181–217.

created this place. God of mercy, have no mercy on those who here killed Jewish children.”<sup>2</sup>

This leads us to ask about those dark areas in which irreparable harm has been done. The problem was stated unforgettably by Ivan in book 5 of *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the story of the general who turned his hounds loose on the son of one of his serfs for a trifling offense. After reading William Styron’s novel *Sophie’s Choice* or seeing the film, we might also ask whether Sophie could be expected to forgive the officer in the extermination camp who put her in the position of having to choose the life of one of her two small children but not both. These are fictional cases but not unreal, nor in the light of our contemporary experience incredible. Leaving aside fiction, should a Palestinian Arab civilian whose house, crops, and livelihood have been destroyed by the Israeli military forgive? Should the Israeli family whose child died in a Tel Aviv disco as the result of a suicide attack forgive the perpetrator? What would it mean for the survivors of the victims of 9/11 to forgive those who flew the planes into the World Trade Center? Are there not situations when to forgive would be to trivialize certain fundamental human values? And to make an end, do we ever have an obligation *to ourselves* to forgive, to let go of feelings of resentment, whether the offer of forgiveness is accepted or not, whether a reconciliation takes place or not? Even accepting that those who harm us do not put us under an obligation to forgive, if the request for forgiveness is genuine should not our knowledge of the truth about ourselves, our own need for forgiveness, oblige us to respond?

### Honor, Shame, and Getting Even in Antiquity

Since we are concerned with the possibility of reconciliation at the social and political level, it remains to be seen to what extent and in what ways these questions and probings are transferable from the sphere of personal relationships to the more complex world of international and intergroup relations. And since we will be talking about the Bible, which is a collection of ancient texts produced by and speaking about an ancient society, one in several respects profoundly different from ours, another rather basic question arises, namely, whether a disposition to forgive was considered a good thing, a virtue, in antiquity and the act of forgiving a virtuous act.<sup>3</sup> Forgiveness is not discussed

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2. Quoted in Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 44.

3. The geographical horizon in this essay is limited to classical, Levantine, and Near Eastern antiquity.

in the ethical treatises of Aristotle and Cicero, and perhaps only Plutarch and Seneca even so much as mention it. Whoever forgives in the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*? (Consider, for example, Achilles's reaction to the theft of the girl Briseis by Agamemnon in *Iliad* 9.383–86). Since ancient Israel was part of that world, we should not be surprised to learn that the most common Hebrew verb for forgiving, *sēlîhâ* (with its derivative substantives), appears fifty times in the Old Testament but never with reference to one person forgiving another. This is also the case with the six or seven other Hebrew verbs within the same semantic field.<sup>4</sup> There are instances where *sēlîhâ* has the meaning of ritual atonement through sacrifice or release from a vow (Lev 4:20; Num 15:25, 26, 28), but in all cases it is God who forgives—or occasionally refuses to do so.

The probable reason for this situation is that in those cultures the linked concepts of honor and shame effectively excluded the thought of forgiveness. The natural and socially accepted reaction to a real or perceived injury or insult was to redress the balance by getting even, returning the compliment, restoring a damaged self-esteem. According to *Nichomachean Ethics* (5.10) maintaining or restoring justice toward oneself is the duty of the virtuous person; getting even is, in other words, a moral imperative. Nobody suffers injustice voluntarily, says Aristotle. Forgiveness does not enter into it.

To quote biblical examples of this paying-back and getting-even approach to morality is probably unnecessary, but we may at least recall how David, when fleeing from Absalom, refused there and then to react to insults hurled at him by one Shimei ben Gera, a Benjaminite, but on his deathbed he commanded Solomon to “bring his grey head down with blood to the underworld” (1 Kgs 2:9)—shades of Don Corleone! The much-maligned *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye”)<sup>5</sup> may be read as a way of exercising some social control over this process, introducing some measure of equity while insisting on the need for restitution. The sense might therefore be “*only* an eye for an eye, *only* a tooth for a tooth”—paying back, but in an evenhanded way.

The concern to limit vengeance suggests that there existed in ancient societies like Israel an awareness of the destructive potential of revenge, and this in turn could have opened up space for finding intimations of an ideal of forgiveness as a personal virtue. Perhaps, then, the idea of interpersonal forgiveness

4. In Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37, Hampton brings to bear on the topic the verbs *kippēr* and *nāsā*, meaning “cover up” and “take away an offense,” respectively. It is risky, however, to draw conclusions for the understanding or practice of forgiveness from purely semantic or etymological considerations.

5. Exod 21:23–25; Lev 24:17–21; Deut 19:21.

owed a debt to legal norms governing social relations rather than the reverse. Classical Greek authors (e.g., Plato, Plutarch) speak of forgiving debts and other legal obligations, language still in use, and when we ask God to forgive our sins in the Lord's Prayer we are, literally, asking for the forgiveness of debts. The biblical Jubilee (Lev 25) called for the forgiveness of debts (*opheilēmata*), the freeing of those in indentured service, and the restoration of property in the fiftieth year. Whether it was observed or not, on which scholarly opinion is divided, it could easily have suggested analogous restorative acts in interpersonal relations. As a way of creating a clean slate, it also provides biblical warrant for the forgiveness of Third World debts recommended at more than one summit meeting but still to be implemented in a satisfactory manner. We recall that, according to Luke 4:18–19, Jesus made the Jubilee, “the year of the Lord's favor,” the cornerstone of his ministry.

### The Allure of Violence

In spite of its chronological and cultural distance, the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament provides some examples of interpersonal reconciliation of sorts. Joseph is eventually reconciled with his brothers and Jacob with Esau, but in both instances there is a price to be paid by the offending party. Joseph's brothers must journey to and fro between Canaan and Egypt and suffer distress to the point where Judah offers his life in place of the endangered Benjamin. Jacob, the “Heel Grabber,” must suffer through twenty years of exile and indentured service. As a “Trickster” himself, Jacob must be repeatedly out-tricked by Laban, including, incredibly, being tricked into marrying the wrong woman. Only then can he return, embrace his wronged brother, earn a new name, and take on a new destiny. Even then the reconciliation is somewhat cagey, ending with them going their separate ways with almost unseemly haste. It seems that reconciliation is always bought at a price; there is no cheap grace.

We must nevertheless acknowledge that on the subject of religiously sanctioned violence biblical narrative does not, on the whole, make for edifying reading. Like other relatively small states in the Syro-Palestinian corridor and the Transjordanian region, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were involved in an endless sequence of little wars both defensive and offensive, as well as punitive campaigns, *razzias*, and preemptive strikes. These activities were conducted under the sponsorship of national and ethnic deities—YHWH in the case of the Israelite kingdoms—in much the same way as, for example, the Transjordanian Moabites recorded, in an inscription from the ninth century BC

set up by their king Mesha, the capture and destruction of Israelite towns by direct command of their deity Chemosh (Kamosh). Although they did not like it, the Israelites could hardly complain, since one of their own heroes, Jephthah, had justified the Israelite conquest of Canaan to an Ammonite king in much the same way: "Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that the LORD our God has conquered for our benefit?" (Judg 11:24).

Even worse, some of these "holy wars" ended with the dedication of the survivors—men, women, and children together with their property—as a gift to the deity of the winning side, a ghastly ritual consummated by a wholesale slaughter known as the *herem* (usually translated "the ban"). Here is an example from the Dibhon-Moabite inscription mentioned a moment ago. Mesha is speaking: "I went by night and fought against Nebo [an Israelite town] from the break of dawn until noon, taking it and slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls and maid-servants, for I had devoted them to destruction for the god Ashtar-Chemosh."<sup>6</sup>

Another example is God's command to Moses to take vengeance on the Midianites, a tribal federation from northwest Arabia. He passes on the command to the Israelite tribal levy; they kill all the Midianite males and take the women captive. Moses is angry because of this violation of the *herem*. He orders all the women and male children to be slaughtered on the spot but allows the victors to take for themselves the young unmarried girls (Num 31:1–20). The same fate befell the Amalekites, a nomadic Arab tribe, at the hand of Saul. He was condemned by the prophet Samuel not, as we with our liberal and humane sensitivities might expect, for having carried out a massacre but for having spared their ruler Agag, an omission that was remedied with Agag's dismemberment in the presence of YHWH, a ritual act (1 Sam 15). Jon Levenson of Harvard University has argued that the demonization of the Amalekites, carried over into the book of Esther with its archvillain Haman, a descendant of Agag (Esth 3:1), and reenacted and perpetuated in the festival of Purim with the Purim tree on which Haman's children are hanged, can serve as a counterpart in the Hebrew Bible to anti-Judaism in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

In this situation of endemic hostilities, reconciliation, in the minimal sense of the cessation of warlike activities, could come about only by contractual

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6. J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320.

7. Jon Levenson, "Is There a Counterpart in the Hebrew Bible to New Testament Anti-semitism?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985): 242–60.

agreement reinforced by an oath sworn in the name of the native deity and accompanied by solemn curses threatened in the event of nonobservance of the terms of the agreement. Where these proceedings were accompanied by sharing in a sacrifice and meal, some genuinely friendly gestures might be proffered and some degree of affectivity might enter. An example is the covenant between the related clans of Jacob and Laban as narrated in Genesis 31:43–54. The vassal treaties that have survived, which were essentially coercive instruments wielded by a dominant power (e.g., Assyria with Tyre), use the language of love, fidelity, and mutuality in the preamble to the stipulations, language more suited to interpersonal relations. While we must suppose that neither of the parties to these agreements would have been taken in by this language, it at least makes the point that willingness to enter into binding agreements serves as the first step toward genuine reconciliation at the social and political level by creating the necessary minimal conditions for it to happen. The language simulates, and thereby makes imaginable, the kind of relationship it intimates.

### The Territorial Dimension

The point about binding agreements leads to the observation that in both the ancient and modern worlds conflicts have more often than not been about territory, and that the more territorial claims are couched in religious terms (as, for example, “God gave us this land”), the less amenable the parties involved are to resolution by binding agreement. In Israel of the biblical period, as in neighboring lands, territoriality always had a religious dimension. Like the gods of other countries, YHWH was a locative deity with his own land in which his writ ran, a land occupied by his devotees who held it in leasehold, a situation reflected in laws governing land tenure. When David fled for his life from Saul, he cursed those who had driven him out “to serve other gods,” that is, to reside in a territory under the jurisdiction of a deity other than his own (1 Sam 26:19). When the Syrian general Naaman, healed by the man of God Elisha, vowed to serve the God of Israel after returning to Damascus, he took with him two mule-loads of Israelite earth to enable him to worship YHWH on YHWH’s own turf (2 Kgs 5:17). In exile in Babylon, the psalmist asked how he could sing hymns to his God in a foreign land (Ps 137:4), and the question was not purely rhetorical.

The dissolution of the Judean state followed by successive deportations brought about a momentous change by severing *in principle* this link between

deity and territory. The changed situation is represented symbolically by Ezekiel's mobile chariot throne: the God of Israel was on the move and could appear even in a land contaminated by idolatry, a land like Babylon under the jurisdiction of the imperial deity Marduk. The God of the mobile wilderness sanctuary, the God of Ezekiel's mobile chariot throne, is essentially therefore a deterritorialized deity. In point of historical fact though not historical necessity, however, this new concept was not carried through to its anticipated conclusion. Powerful counterforces set in motion first by Nehemiah, governor of Judah in the mid-fifth century BC, then by the establishment of the Hasmonean principate and the wars of conquest and territorial expansion of the later Hasmoneans, created a new situation.<sup>8</sup>

Since the question of religiously sanctioned territorial claims is still a live issue, with the Bible as the ultimate court of appeal, it is important to make the point that it neither contains one single point of view about land claims and land contracts nor provides one single model for resolving or forestalling territorial conflict. Consider, for example, the contrast between the cycle of narratives about the ancestors in Genesis 12–50 and the account of Joshua's conquest of Canaan. Abraham is promised land, he enters Canaan as a "stranger and alien," he negotiates a division of pastureland with Lot in a peaceful and evenhanded way ("Let there be no strife between you and me," 13:8), and he settles territorial disputes with Abimelech in the Negev by treaty (21:22–34). In the Hebron region he purchases a parcel of land after protracted negotiations reminiscent of bargaining in the *suq* in East Jerusalem (23:1–16). He marries local women in addition to Sarah, thus becoming the ancestor of two of the principal groups of Arab tribes (16:1–16; 25:1–6). Jacob, too, eventually reaches a peaceful settlement with Esau, representative of the Edomites in the south, buys a piece of land at the going rate in the region of Shechem (33:19), and takes two of his sons to task for avenging their sister's honor by wholesale vendetta ("You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land," 34:30).

The alternative model is that of the divinely mandated campaign of extermination waged by Joshua as narrated in the book named for him. In view of the numerous implausibilities of this conquest account and the absence of independent confirmation, most critical scholars would read Joshua's campaign of

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8. That Nehemiah served as heroic model for the Maccabees is intimated by the festival letter at the beginning of 2 Maccabees (1:10–2:18) and by other indications.

extermination as the transposition into narrative form of the ideology inscribed in Deuteronomy: no covenants to be made with the local inhabitants, no intermarrying with them, their religious buildings and symbols to be demolished, and they themselves utterly destroyed (Deut 7:1–6). The origins of these narrative traditions have been discussed endlessly. A view many scholars would now accept is that Abraham and Joshua stand for two fundamentally different foundation myths originating in different parties and perhaps also at different points in time after the resettlement of the land under Persian rule (539–332 BC).

Throughout the entire Second Temple period, debate about the relation of Israel's God to territory and therefore to national and ethnic identity—and about the relation of in-group to out-group—continued, often acrimoniously, leading eventually to the formation of dissident sects inclusive of early Christianity. The concept of YHWH as a universal deity with concern for all peoples that emerged from this debate, while never entirely free of ambiguities and misgivings, opened up new possibilities for political reconciliation. The emergence of this concept and the counterforces with which it had to contend can be illustrated by the book of Isaiah.

### The Book of Isaiah as a Test Case

First, the bad news about the book. A good measure of resentment and *Schadenfreude* is to be expected in writings that reflect an international situation in which, as Thucydides put it three centuries later, “the strong do what they want and the weak suffer what they must.” But it will leave many readers uneasy when the intensity of negative emotion is expressed in horrifying cameos of violence, the equivalent of Goya's *Disasters of War*: personified Moab drowned in a cesspool (25:10–11) and personified Edom trampled into a bloody pulp in a winepress (63:1–6) in a passage that led the one-time famous biblical scholar Friedrich Delitzsch finally to give up on the Old Testament. Some of the other material in the book looks equally unpromising. According to one projection of an alternative future, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Arabs, and others will come to Jerusalem in chains (45:14); they will lick the dust of the Israelites' feet (49:22–23); they will participate in Jerusalem's glorious future, but they will do so as bearers of tribute, menial laborers, *Gastarbeiter* (60:12–14; 66:10–16). What has been called “the fantasy of the oppressed” does not make for pleasant reading. It is understandable, but experience demonstrates that when fantasy spills over into real time in the real world, it can translate into nightmarish reality.

These Isaian perspectives can be explained and possibly even condoned, but they are not calculated to advance the cause of reconciliation and the resolution of conflict between peoples. But this same prophetic book gives us the most compelling projections of a future without violence and without its ultimate expression in war. There will always be the temptation to dismiss such visions of the future as wishful thinking or a willful distraction from present tasks. But our collective experience should have taught us that without the projection of such alternative futures, without what has been called “the passion for what is possible,” we remain stuck in our grooves, frozen in place, with the impulse toward change stalled by resignation and inertia.

A striking example can be found in the two messianic poems in chapters 9 and 11 that envisage the end of warfare as such: “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire” (9:5). With this there will come a time when the powerful and rich will no longer prey on the poor, a time of justice and righteousness (11:4–5), the end of *homo homini lupus*. There will even be peace in the animal world, reconciliation between the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the lion and the calf. What the poet had in mind in this idyllic scene is a return to the first creation, the peaceful kingdom that existed before the emergence of our damaged world, an immemorial theme that incorporates the yearning for transformation and renewal, a theme attested from third-millennium BC Sumerian myth to Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue and beyond.<sup>9</sup>

The Isaian poems and the Fourth Eclogue have in common the anticipatory celebration of the birth of a son and heir to a ruling hegemonic figure, respectively King Ahaz of Judah and Mark Antony following on his marriage to Octavia. The child to be born is destined to be the agent of renewal, the one who in due course will usher in the golden age, give judgment for the poor, and strike the violent “with the rod of his mouth” (11:4). In this scenario, transformation will come about coercively, by means of force majeure; injustice and violence will be overcome by the application of greater violence. The situation is different, however, with the well-known Isaian text that presages the abolition of war and the beating of swords into plowshares (2:2–4):

It will come to pass in days to come  
that the mountain, the Lord’s house, shall be established  
at the top of the mountains, raised high over the hills.

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9. “Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo” (“The great line of the centuries begins anew,” *Eclogae* IV, 5).

Then all nations shall stream towards it,  
 many peoples shall come and say,  
 "Up, let us go to the Lord's mountain,  
 to the house of Jacob's God,  
 that he may instruct us in his ways,  
 that we may walk in his paths."  
 For from Zion instruction will proceed,  
 the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
 He will adjudicate among nations,  
 arbitrate for many peoples.  
 They shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
 their spears into pruning hooks.  
 No nation shall take up the sword against another,  
 no more shall they learn to make war.<sup>10</sup>

At first reading, this poem sounds utopian and idealistic, but if we consider it more closely, we can see that it incorporates objectives that are actually being pursued as policy goals in our contemporary world. For example, it is inscribed at the entrance to the United Nations building in New York City. It speaks of nations and peoples rather than hegemonic figures coming together and speaking civilly to one another; it is internationalist; it envisages arbitration and negotiation taking the place of recourse to armed struggle; it advocates disarmament and a shift in production from weaponry to such basics as food production; it foresees a future in which war will no longer be an option. All of this is, however, postulated on a religious premise. Political theorists of the realist or neorealist school would no doubt reply that between the actual dynamics, not to say chaos, of international relations and this biblical vision of a reconciled, disarmed, and peaceful humanity, a great chasm is fixed. We should concentrate on procedures rather than visions of the future, on managing conflict rather than setting our sights unrealistically on the abolition of war, on focusing our energies on limited and achievable goals. There is much to be said for this approach, but what limited goals we pursue, what procedures we follow, depend on what kind of future we project for humanity.

There are statements in the second section of the book, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah, that appear to offer salvation to foreigners but sound more like an offer of the Cosa Nostra kind, an offer they can't refuse. The ambivalence apparent in such passages (e.g., 45:14, 22–23; 49:22–23) is one aspect of the

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10. This translation is from my *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 6, 189.

struggle between the more integrationist and the more universalist elements in postexilic Jewish communities. Another aspect, also reflected in the book of Isaiah, comes to expression in divergent interpretations of the Abrahamic blessing. In Genesis 12:1–3 the Lord’s command to Abraham to journey into an unknown country is followed by an assurance that he himself will be blessed and that his blessing will affect all the families of the earth. The wording of this last phrase is ambiguous. It can be interpreted as saying that Abraham will be a source of blessing to all the families of the earth (“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”), but it can also be construed as saying that all these others will bless themselves with reference to Abraham (“With reference to you all the families of the earth will bless themselves”), rather than themselves being the direct recipients of the blessing. Throughout Deutero-Isaiah the Abrahamic blessing is bestowed on the Judean community and at least once, by extension, on proselytes (Isa 44:3–4). But there were those who were farsighted enough to look beyond the boundaries of Israel, who interpreted the Abrahamic blessing in the broadest possible sense. One of the most remarkably irenic statements in the book extends the blessing, entailing the offer of reconciliation, to the two “evil empires” of Israel’s historical experience: “On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying: ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’” (19:24–25).

This text expresses the conviction that, no matter what the situation, reconciliation between enemies is always possible. We can only imagine what it would mean if the three Abrahamic faiths, divided and conflicted today as they are, were to take this text as their motto.



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